INTRODUCTION

Prime Spark

Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Willy Maley

English Literature, University of Glasgow, Scotland

CONTACT Vassiliki Kolocotroni Vassiliki.Kolocotroni@glasgow.ac.uk

Willy Maley Willy.Maley@glasgow.ac.uk

Muriel Spark is one of the most prolific and profound writers to have emerged in the last century. Admired by Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, John Updike and Frank Kermode, Spark is a writer of world importance, as well as a distinctively Scottish writer of the stature of Burns, Scott and Stevenson, yet she remains a relatively neglected figure in terms of her contemporary critical reception, especially when measured against her output and impact. Her 22 novels from *The Comforters* (1957) to *The Finishing School* (2004), the 41 short stories collected in *Complete Stories*, and the poetry gathered in *All the Poems* are a measure of her output, but her writing has had neither the critical investment it merits, nor the institutional recognition it deserves. Her best-known work, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), has had a lasting impact. Thanks in part to Maggie Smith's Oscar-winning performance in the 1969 film version, it cemented Spark's international reputation, but the extraordinary success of *Brodie* means that this novel and that performance has dominated the public memory. Discussing her work at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2004, Spark reflected: 'A lot of my other books are overlooked due to Maggie Smith. Lots of people think that she wrote it'.[1] Spark's work cuts across periods, forms and genres. A distinctive and accomplished novelist, she was also a prolific author of

short stories, biographer, essayist, radio dramatist, children's writer, playwright and – primarily, in her own view – a poet.[2]

There have been several book-length studies of Spark's work, and 2009 saw the publication of Martin Stannard's landmark biography, but there remains the pressing need for a fuller critical appraisal.[3] 2018 sees the centenary of Muriel Spark's birth and this affords an ideal opportunity to reconsider the contribution to fiction and criticism of a writer of international importance and to place her in the multiple contexts that shaped her world and her writing: Edinburgh, Africa, London, New York and Italy; Scottish ballads, fantasy, theology, existentialism, the *nouveau roman*, politics, the spectacle, radio play and film.

The purpose of this special issue is to draw on some of these contexts and reassess Spark's importance for modern literature, investigating her stylistic brilliance and weird scenarios alongside her remarkable life. A wide range of experiences and influences shaped Spark's identity before she emerged as a novelist of distinction at the age of thirty-nine: her 'gentile Jewishness'; her Edinburgh upbringing and schooling; her African sojourn as a newly-wed and young mother that brought danger and daring that rippled through her writing; her wartime intelligence work, when the art of propaganda put down deep roots for her future fiction; her editorship of the *Poetry Review* and lifelong commitment to that art; her biographical and critical studies, early labours that laid the foundation for a complex critical awareness of the constructed nature of character; and her search for faith and conversion to Catholicism in 1954, the prelude, she would later claim, for her full emergence as a writer – although by 1957, when her first novel appeared, she was already a force to reckon with, having won *The Observer* short story competition from 7000 entrants in 1951.

Much of Spark's experience and outlook is contained in her assessments of other writers. The biographical and critical studies of Wordsworth (1950), Mary Shelley (1951; 1953), the Brontës (1952; 1953; 1960), John Masefield (1953), Proust (1953), and John Henry Newman (1957), all testify to the depth and diversity of her engagement with literary lives, and with the crossover between faith and fiction. Spark's biographies of Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë in particular arguably reinvigorated interest in their writing, while also serving her own. In these investigations of the writers she admired is to be found Spark's own theory of literature. In the preface to the revised 1988 edition of her 1951 biographical study of Shelley, Spark remarked: 'On first reading through my work after so many years, I was amused to perceive that my prose style had taken on a touch of Mary Shelley's'.[4] In her 1992 memoir *Curriculum Vitae* she also recalls: 'I was reading the Border ballads so repetitively and attentively that I memorized many of them without my noticing it. The steel and bite of the ballads, so remorseless and yet so lyrical, entered my literary bloodstream, never to depart'.[5] *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark's account of her making as a writer conceals as much as it reveals and stops at the threshold of her first novel. Like all her writing, her autobiography is characterized by irony, archness and invention. Her biographies of other writers are arguably more expressive of her art.[6] Martin Stannard's 2009 biography fills in many blanks, and Alan Taylor's memoir gives a gossipy gloss, but there is still a huge archive of material to be engaged with.[7] Spark jealously guarded her life after an early exposure to what she saw as misrepresentation by her former lover and collaborator Derek Stanford.[8] Thereafter, she was determined to set the record straight, and curious critics who got too close for comfort were told off, including two of our contributors to this issue, Bryan Cheyette and Martin Stannard.

Here, we bring together a distinguished collection of critics and writers – our own Brodie Set – to discuss the significance of Spark's work and shed light on less noted aspects of her canon. What comes to the fore in the critical accounts that comprise this volume is the magpie nature of Spark's imagination and sourcing of material, as well as its audacity, tenacity and breadth. An avid reader of news stories and unabashed aficionado of sensation and intrigue in political, polite and literary circles, Spark writes as an infiltrator of worlds and minds. Her forays are often lethal; as she put it in a famous address to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York on 26 May 1970: 'I advocate the arts of satire and of ridicule. And I see no other living art form for the future. Ridicule is the only honourable weapon we have left'.[9] As the essays collected here suggest, ridicule is one of the many weapons in Spark's campaign against lifeless imagination and supine intelligence. Her poet's ear for startling voice play, her critic's eye for recurrent motifs and her appreciation of single-minded, compulsive, often arcane or inscrutable life performances, underpin her creation of inimitable characters and extraordinary situations. Spark's rendition of the power of words and images to sustain lying, deluded and deluding, structures of feeling, is spectacular in its own right, and relentless. As a connoisseur of propaganda and political manipulation alone she deserves to be studied alongside the great post-war satirists, but Spark's repertoire extends beyond that, and our contributors show just how deeply she was immersed in the world around her, drawing on rich observational powers in order to enable her satirical gaze to penetrate the layers of carefully constructed everydayness.

Picking up on one key aspect of Spark's idea of a 'prime', Allan Hepburn explores her third novel, *Memento Mori* (1959), as a coming-of-old-age story that challenges the *Bildungsroman* as exemplary novelistic form, and with it the inbuilt

prejudices around age that beset critical and creative practice, prejudices that are often gendered. Hepburn reveals the extent to which Spark drew on her own researches into the subject of ageing and ageism as well as personal experience of caring for an elderly relative. Spark's 'gerontography' is thus an early example of her willingness to push the boundaries of form and confront stereotypes by offering, at a time when 'angry young men' were grabbing the headlines, a group of elderly citizens still capable of art and thought and wit, as well as mischief and evil.

Michael Gardiner teases out at the ways in which time and motion studies and theories of labour prevalent in the 1950s informed Spark's early fiction, specifically *Robinson* (1958) and *The Ballad of Peckham R*ye (1960). Here, Spark, immersed in her moment, and fixing on the complicity with capitalist development demanded by the post-war consensus, is also our contemporary, looking ahead to the new managerialism and the politics of compliance in place of struggle and strife. Bringing in figures like Adam Smith, Walter Scott, and Daniel Defoe, Gardiner makes the case for Spark's radicalism not as personal politics but as engaged art.

Martin Stannard comes at *Ballad* from a different angle. His essay looks at the idea of the 'lyrical' in the novel, taking Spark at her word as a poet and investigating the extent to which this novel draws upon her notion of 'nevertheless' as a kind of paradox that captures her poetic interests and her roots in the ballad tradition. With its musical adaptation and devilish aspect, Spark's novel plays with voice and sound in the way her radio work of the period does, and shows her to be a writer engaged in artistic alchemy, embodied by the shape-shifting, name-changing, game-playing Dougal Douglas/Douglas Dougal.

Vassiliki Kolocotroni engages with *The Driver's Seat* (1970), Spark's own favourite novel, which she called her 'creepiest'.[10] Kolocotroni indicates the ways in

which this novel exemplifies Spark's recalibration of familiar literary notions of action, agency, character, narrative drive and plot in order to confound readers' expectations and circumvent the known registers of the moral or psychological tale. Lise, in search of her 'type', and seemingly in charge of her story, is a controlling figure in the style of Jean Brodie and Sister Alexandra (*Abbess of Crewe*), acted upon and actor in what might be seen as some 'rude and strange production', as Charlotte Brontë once wrote apologetically of *Wuthering Heights*, her sister's extreme and compelling tale. Kolocotroni takes her cue from Spark's deep engagement with the Brontës, their single-mindedness and self-fashioning, to account for the dramatic contouring of Lise's character, as well as its demolition in Spark's hands.

Marina MacKay exercises similar sweep and subtlety in her pursuit of Spark's various designs for life, uncovering the roots of Spark's fictive mode in the literature of advice, an ever-present preoccupation typified by a novel like *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963). MacKay shows that Spark's incorporation of the self-help manual helped her to hone a literary style that sheds fresh light on the persuasive power of the printed word to change the habits of a lifetime. By opposing the mantra that literature changes nothing, or teaches us nothing, Spark recalls the transformative capacity of language to shape futures, to transfigure and turn around. Whether or not Yeats sent out certain men the English shot, Miss Brodie certainly prompted one of her girls to be shot by the Spanish. MacKay elegantly exhibits Spark's absorption of the self-help genre as an expression of the capacity of fiction to change minds.

Adam Piette reflects on Spark's role as a wartime propagandist and expert in disinformation and explores the persistence of propaganda in her fiction. She was broadcasting and depicting the uses of 'fake news' from an early stage, learning how to throw her readers off the scent or lead them up the garden path as required. This

work of propaganda was done primarily through the wireless, making voice and the auditory imagination key to the broadcasting of deliberate untruths. Drawing on Spark's experiences Piette demonstrates the extent to which novels such as *The Hothouse of the East River* (1973) and, most emphatically, *The Only Problem* (1984), feature fake news as bound up with the pervasiveness of the media state.

According to Martin McQuillan, '*The Mandelbaum Gate* is unique amongst Spark's work because the material she has to deal with here overruns the formal exactitude by which she orders the world in her other works'.[11] Spark's longest novel, which its author called her *Passage to India,* is no less preoccupied with the complexities of political history, personal experience and gender dynamics than was Forster's work.[12] Advancing the notion of 'literary Zionism' as a way of grasping the novel's nuances and unresolved elements, Marilyn Reizbaum draws on the Beckettian moment in Spark's depiction of the Eichmann trial in order to argue for the inconclusive and open-ended nature of this work and its consequences for Spark's larger project. When Barbara Vaughan answers the judge's question, 'What are we waiting for?', with 'We're waiting for Godot', she apprehends the impossibility of a verdict that would do justice to the act under examination.[13] Of Barbara's relationship with Harry Clegg, the narrative reflects: 'She was not an English spinster merely, but also a half-Jew, and was drawn to the equivalent quality in him that quite escaped both the unspoken definition "Englishman of lower-class origin," and the spoken one "red-brick genius."'[14] This escaping of definitions and positions, spoken and unspoken, is, as Reizbaum amply illustrates, key to Spark's fiction.

Spark was a European writer, deeply influenced by continental traditions, classical and contemporary. 'She lived in Italy because Italians knew how to treat writers. They left them alone'.[15] In her contribution Carla Sassi investigates Spark's

lifelong literary and personal relationship with Italy, from Miss Jean Brodie's love affair with Italian art and politics, expressed dictatorially as a non-negotiable preference for Giotto and Mussolini, through to the Italian novels of her middle period – *The Public Image* (1968), *The Takeover* (1976), and *Territorial Rights* (1979). *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is a classic, but the others, while not among Spark's most celebrated works, yield hidden treasures. Their complex layering is illustrative of Spark's archaeological view of history and culture, her deep excavations into the past as present, and her capacity to dig down through the levels in order to demythologise reality and realise myth.

Patricia Waugh examines the capacity for overhearing and recording in Spark's work, her poetic power to eavesdrop on the everyday. Informed by her ability to tune in to a variety of voices, Spark's writing becomes a listening device, each novel a book bug that records the surrounding sounds of the contemporary scene. As a propagandist, poet and radio dramatist she developed an extraordinary range of idioms, evidence of her rich auditory imagination and her understanding of literature as 'voices at play'. Waugh listens in to Spark's frequencies and follows the flow of her fiction from *The Comforters* (1957) to *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988).

Bryan Cheyette's insightful engagement with the aftereffects of trauma in Spark's work illuminates the relationship between the reticence and restraint of her recollection of her life up to her conversion in *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), and the two novels of the 1980s that reflect much more passionately and poetically on that formative period before she became a novelist, *Loitering with Intent* (1981) and *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988). The autobiography lacks the sparkle of the fiction. Cheyette's delicate exploration of the double-edged politics of biography reveals the paradox of a writer who makes art out of life while defending her life as fact, and his

richly observed encounter with Spark's traumatic art traverses the expanse of her work, right up to her vigorous interrogation of the factual in *Aiding and Abetting* (2004).

The issue closes with reflections on Spark's significance by four contemporary figures on the Scottish literary scene with fascination for Spark. In 'Spark at play', the editors discuss Spark's only full-length stage-play, *Doctors of Philosophy,* first performed in 1962, with David Greig, Artistic Director of The Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, who was involved in a revival of this neglected work at the 2018 Edinburgh International Book Festival. Published by Macmillan in 1963, Spark's play was reprinted three years later in a Penguin collection entitled *Novelists' Theatre*, where it appeared alongside *The Mulberry Bush* (1956), by Angus Wilson, and *August for the People*(1961), by Nigel Dennis.[16] Wilson's work was staged a few weeks before John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* changed the face of British theatre, and while the idea of getting new work out of writers best known for fiction persisted, 'novelists' theatre' was a limiting label. Ironically, Spark's former collaborator, Derek Stanford, who saw the play on its first run, months after submitting his monograph on her work, and thus too late to discuss it extensively, nevertheless found space in his preface to praise her dramatic potential: 'Muriel Spark's first stage-play is important because the theatre provides her with the best medium for her gifts of dialogue'.[17] *Doctors of Philosophy* is much more than novelist's theatre, as Greig's insightful remarks affirm.

In the writers' reflections that follow, Leila Aboulela revisits *Memento Mori* as a novel preoccupied not only with late life but with an awareness of the afterlife anchored in Spark's religious faith. As a profound and macabre meditation on old age and death, Spark's novel appeals to the faithful and those whose faith lies first and

foremost in fiction. Louise Welsh homes in on 'The House of the Famous Poet', a short story published in *The New Yorker* on 2 April 1966 about a near-death experience that has an essay, a poem, and, in *Hothouse by the East River* (1973), a novel as companion pieces. Welsh demonstrates the 'there but for the grace of God' nature of a story that almost announces a new genre of 'funerealism' and both builds on and anticipates Spark's obsession with death and its aftermath. And finally, starting from Spark's last novel, *The Finishing School* (2004), Zoe Strachan works and plays her way through the advice – grave and glib – of a writer's writer whose treatment of familiar tropes of character and plot serves to inspire and liberate.

This special issue as part of the centenary celebration will hopefully open the door to wider analysis and broader awareness of the full range of Spark's work than could be essayed here. The revival of her stage-play and the recent publication of a selection of her critical essays signal a welcome interest in the work beyond the prose fiction, but much remains to be done.[18] Vital to the future of Spark studies is the pressing need for a complete scholarly edition of the works. Spark, as the essays collected here confirm, is an author whose considerable output calls for the kind of sustained critical attention given to other writers of her stature. Her writing repays a thorough quarrying of contexts and sources because it is not only embedded in the poetical and political worlds she inhabited so inventively but is deeply rooted in the literary cultures and traditions she studied avidly as a writer, editor and biographer.

[1] Charlotte Higgins, 'We can always touch the hem of the great one's skirt later', *The Guardian* (23 August 2004), https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/aug/23/books.edinburgh04, accessed 29 August 2018.

[2] The short fiction is collected as Muriel Spark, *The Complete Short Stories* (London: Viking, 2001; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002). A mix of stories and radio plays appeared as *Voices at Play* (London: Macmillan, 1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961). Spark's three children's stories are: *The Very Fine Clock*, with illustrations by Edward Gorey (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), and *The French Window and The Small Telephone*, with illustrations by Penelope Jardine (London: Colophon Press, 1993). The poetry is collected in Muriel Spark, *All the Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004; 2006); this is not in fact 'all the poetry', but a selection. Spark's biographies include *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Hadleigh: Tower Bridge Publications, 1951); revised as *Mary Shelley* (London: Constable, 1988; 1993); Muriel Spark, *The Essence of the Brontës: A Compilation with Essays* (London: Peter Owen, 1952; 1993); Muriel Spark, *John Masefield* (London: Peter Nevill, 1953; revised edition, London: Pimlico, 1992); and Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford (eds.), *Letters of John Henry Newman* (London: Peter Owen, 1957) – Spark's essay on 'Newman as Catholic' offers clues to her own conversion and insights into her theory of art and life writing (pp. 133-60). What Spark says of Newman's account of his life could be read alongside her own: 'It has been said that as a history of his religious opinions the *Apologia* is at times not accurate. How could it be, in the hurried circumstances? It is a document of memory at white-heat; as an autobiography it is artistic in nature; as a work of art it is autobiographical in kind' (141).

[3] See for example Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark*, Contemporary Writers (London: Methuen, 1986); Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, Writers and Their Work (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2000); Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, *Vocation and Identity in the Fiction of Muriel Spark* (Columbia, Mo.; London: University of Missouri Press, 1990); Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Paul Elek, 1974); Karl Malkoff, *Muriel Spark* (New York and London: Columbia University Press); Allan Massie, *Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1979); Norman Page, *Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Jennifer Lynn Randisi, *On Her Way Rejoicing: The Fiction of Muriel Spark* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991); Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *Muriel Spark* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984); Judy Sproxton, *The Women of Muriel Spark* (London: Constable, 1992); Patricia Stubbs, *Muriel Spark*, Writers and Their Work (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1973); Dorothea Walker, *Muriel Spark* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1988); Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982).

[4] Muriel Spark, *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Hadleigh: Tower Bridge Publications, 1951); revised as *Mary Shelley* (London: Constable, 1988; 1993), p. xii

[5] Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography* (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1992; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 98.

[6] For an excellent discussion, see David Goldie, 'Muriel Spark and the Problems of Biography' in Michael Gardner and Willy Maley (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 5-15

[7] See Alan Taylor, *Appointment in Arezzo: A Friendship with Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2017).
[8] Derek Stanford, *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1963).
[9] 'Muriel Spark, 'The Desegregation of Art', from "Muriel Spark on Herself and Her Art", in Joseph Hynes (ed.), *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), p. 35.
[10] McQuillan, '"The Same Informed Air": An Interview with Muriel Spark', p. 228.
[11] Martin McQuillan, 'Unfinished Business: Muriel Spark and Hannah Arendt in Palestine', in Michael Gardiner, Graeme MacDonald and Niall O'Gallagher (eds.), *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 147-157, at 156.
[12] Martin McQuillan, '"The Same Informed Air": An Interview with Muriel Spark', in Martin McQuillan (ed.), *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 215.
[13] Muriel Spark, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (London: Penguin, 1967; first published 1965), p. 180.
[14] Spark, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, pp. 40-41.
[15] Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, p. 434.
[16] *Novelists' Theatre,* introduced by Eric Rhode (Middlesex: Penguin, 1966); Spark's play, third in the volume, is reprinted on pp. 191-279.
[17] Stanford, *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study* , p. 15.
[18] Muriel Spark, *The Golden Fleece: Essays*, edited with a preface by Penelope Jardine (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014).